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Further Review of Petition to List “Eastern” Subspecies of Sage-grouse Halted

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced that a petition to list “eastern” sage-grouse as endangered failed to show these grouse are either a subspecies or a distinct population segment from other sage-grouse populations. Therefore, they are not eligible for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

At the same time, the Service will continue to evaluate other petitions to list sage-grouse as endangered across its entire U.S. range, which includes parts of 11 states. The Service intends to address all outstanding petitions, including the American Lands Alliance petition, for the greater sage-grouse within 90 days (by March 29, 2004,) subject to legal commitments, resource limitations, and competing priorities.

“New biological information indicates that the eastern sage-grouse is not a valid subspecies of the greater sage-grouse, nor does it merit listing as a separate population,” said Ralph Morgenweck, the Service’s Director of the Mountain-Prairie Region.

The Institute for Wildlife Protection petitioned the agency to list “eastern sage-grouse” as endangered. The Service’s 90-day finding on the petition was sent to the Federal Register on January 2, 2004, as part of a settlement agreement.

“We will continue to work with the Governor’s Sage Grouse Conservation Planning Team in their efforts to conserve and protect sage-grouse in Nevada,” said Bob Williams, Supervisor of the Fish & Wildlife Service’s Nevada Office. “Having an approved sage grouse conservation plan completed this year would be a key element to add into any future status reviews.”

This decision is similar to a conclusion announced by the Service last year involving the “western sage-grouse.” Though “western sage-grouse” were described as early as 1946, biologists since then have questioned the validity of separating eastern and western subspecies.

Indeed, a genetics study conducted on the two subspecies indicates there is no difference between them. In February 2003, the Service declined further review of the “western” subspecies of sage-grouse based on these findings.

Concern about long-term declines in sage-grouse populations has prompted western state fish and wildlife agencies and Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to form a cooperative partnership aimed at conserving and managing sagebrush habitat for the benefit of sage-grouse and other sagebrush dependent species.

“We will continue to work with federal and state agencies as well as private organizations to conserve the greater sage-grouse and its habitat through voluntary partnerships on both public and private lands,” said Morgenweck.

Since 2001, for example, the Service has provided Utah with \$2.4 million and Washington with \$730,000 for the restoration of sagebrush habitat. Through its Landowner Incentive Program, the Service also provided \$1.4 million to Montana to improve the management of sagebrush habitat on private lands there.

Over the past five years, the Bureau of Land Management has worked with several western states on cooperative sage-grouse conservation projects and has established partnerships with communities throughout the West to conserve and restore sage-grouse habitat. These efforts are designed to head off continued loss of America’s important sagebrush ecosystems, which support hundreds of plant and animal species, including sage-grouse.

Approximately one half of the sagebrush habitat in the United States is on land administered by the Bureau of Land Management. BLM will spend \$1.235 million this year on a variety of projects to map and monitor sage-grouse populations and habitat, develop cooperative conservation projects to conserve these game birds, and work with state and federal partners on other conservation planning initiatives.

The largest of the native grouse, sage-grouse are ground-nesting birds. Adult males can reach lengths of up to 30 inches and weigh up to seven pounds. They also have commonly been called sage fowl, spine-tailed grouse, fool hen, cock-of-the-plains, and sage chicken. Sage-grouse depend on sagebrush most of the year for roosting cover and food, relying on it almost entirely for food in the winter. During the spring breeding season, the males defend territory and perform elaborate displays with specialized plumage and vocalizations to attract females.

The Endangered Species Act requires to the extent possible that within 90 days of receiving a petition, the Service determine whether the petition contains sufficient biological information to indicate that further review of the species’ status is warranted. This is known as a **90-day finding**. It is the first step in the process of determining whether a species should be listed as threatened or endangered. If the Service issues a negative 90-day finding, as it has on the petitions to list the eastern and western subpopulations of sage-grouse, then no further review occurs. If the Service issues a positive 90-day finding, the Service begins a nine-month review to determine whether the species in question should be listed. That 12-month finding may conclude that such a listing either is "not warranted," "warranted but precluded" by higher priority listing actions, or "warranted." If, after the initial 12-month review, the Service believes the species is threatened or endangered (and listing is not precluded by higher priority species), the Service would propose to list the species. Public comment would be sought and considered, and the proposal would be peer reviewed by independent scientists before a final decision would be made.

For more information about the sage-grouse and this finding, please visit the Service’s web site at <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/birds/sagegrouse/>.